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Undead ghosts: spectrality and the transgression of cultural norms

Abstract

When on 30 December 2010, JASAL received a 'last will and testament' from Mudrooroo from Nepal- 'Portrait of the Artist as a Sick Old Villain 'Me Yes I Am He the Villain': Reflections of a Bloke From Outside'-we were both energized and relieved. Coming as it did after a long self- and other-imposed silence, it was exciting to have one of the foremost theorists of Indigenous Australian writing enter the national conversation again.

Keywords

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Undead Ghosts: Spectrality and the Transgression of Cultural Norms

When on 30 December 2010, *JASAL* received a ‘last will and testament’ from Mudrooroo from Nepal—‘Portrait of the Artist as a Sick Old Villain ‘Me Yes I Am He the Villain’: Reflections of a Bloke From Outside’—we were both energized and relieved. Coming as it did after a long self- and other-imposed silence, it was exciting to have one of the foremost theorists of Indigenous Australian writing enter the national conversation again. The haunting cover image and other images that accompanied the document, here reprinted almost exactly as received, held their own pathos, but the tenor of the exposition was/is vintage Mudrooroo—feisty, assertive (not to say aggressive), but most of all alive. He had become the spectre who not merely haunts the reader of Australian literature but has re-emerged as the one who engages, who returns to a difficult past and puts his case. *JASAL* celebrates this as a gift. The issues that silenced him are complex, and they are alluded to and engaged with, both explicitly and implicitly, in Adam Shoemaker’s accompanying (commissioned) essay, ‘Mudrooroo: “Waiting to be Surprised”’ and we hope they will revive the national debate and shift it into new territory. As Shoemaker writes, ‘The 1996 denunciation of Mudrooroo was so powerful, so complete and so all-encompassing that his creative persona literally disappeared from view.’ The national conversation is familiar with identity issues, but Indigenous identity issues are perhaps less familiar, though hopefully in the ten years since Mudrooroo first imposed silence on himself, they too have no doubt shifted gear. Shoemaker goes on to propose that ‘after a decade in the sophisticated wilderness of Buddhist Nepal—it is time to reassess his role, his career and the depth of his contribution set against the purported severity of his transgressions.’ It is typical of the trailblazer that Mudrooroo was, and thankfully still is, that he felt the need to weigh in again, and we at *JASAL* feel privileged and humbled to facilitate that debate. No doubt it will be robust and strident, and we welcome that. We hope too that the globalizing impulses that were becoming manifest in the later volumes of the Ghost Dreaming series will have been cooking new rich, strange and culturally hybrid offerings in the Nepalese places of healing, dreaming and imagination. It seems that there is much more to come out of the Buddhist phase of the culturally hybrid and always vivid life of Mudrooroo.*

Ghosts that walk through the mind and through history also haunt two essays on Christos Tsiolkas’ *Dead Europe*, his most ambitious and transgressive work to date. As Liz Shek-Noble puts it in “‘There Were Phantoms’: Spectral Shadows in Christos Tsiolkas’ *Dead Europe*, ‘The return of the dead and the repression of family secrets are central concerns of Christos Tsiolkas’ *Dead Europe* (2005).’ In this case, the lingering traces of the Holocaust manifest themselves in the collective traumatic memories of Greek migrants to Australia. In this analysis, too, the phantasmagoria of the past wrongs stretch a long way, across distant waters and through generations that would prefer to repress such hard realities.

Michael Vaughan’s “‘What’s haunting *Dead Europe*?’” Trauma fiction as Resistance to Postmodern Governmentality’ proposes ‘that we can read *Dead Europe* as an example of trauma fiction, where the painful past is first accessed through its haunting and troped echoes in the present, and that the trauma Tsiolkas writes of is the blood-soaked history of 20th century European history.’ Drawing on trauma fiction theory and on Jacques Derrida’s concept of hauntology, Vaughan asserts that ‘[i]t is

impossible to write about *Dead Europe*, in fact to read it, without confronting its ghosts.' Each in its own right a significant contribution to a considerable body of critical writing on *Dead Europe*, the essays are enriched by the close juxtaposition.

Roger McDonald's war in 1915 may be fought on European soil at the edge of Asia, but it is very much a novel that resists the spectral in its nihilism and rejection of aestheticism, loving relationships and patriotism, in Lee's reading. In his words, McDonald 'captures the exuberant jingoism as well as the odd oppositional voice which construes the war as an impetuous farce or an imperial swindle. Death is death, and ghosts do not survive the massacre, according to Lee, though McDonald forces his young hero to enumerate his losses and contemplate his meaninglessness. In "'Shapely Experience and the Limits of the 'Late Colonial Transcendentalism': The Portrait of the Artists as Soldier in Roger McDonald's 1915', Christopher Lee asserts 'that Roger McDonald's debut novel.... is a sophisticated and highly self-conscious response to late colonial transcendentalism and that makes it an intriguing intertext for scholars interested in the ways in which our literary archive imagines the problem of Being in a postcolonial country.'

Whereas Mudrooroo might wonder at the pernicious influence of Nietzsche on the Nazis, Christopher Brennan's *Wanderer* comes from a seemingly more innocent world, a pre-World War I existence, but from the standpoint of the man nestled in his suburban safety, the *Wanderer* too must seem spectral, though as Buhagiar would have it, his aloneness in the quest is critical to his triumphant re-engagement with the world of the material. In 'The Alpha and Omega of Brennan's *The Wanderer*', Buhagiar suggests that what looks like spectrality is in fact and action deeply human and questioning. Social behaviours are irrelevant to the soul's quest and it leads back to the world.

Peter Kirkpatrick's 'John Thompson, the Poet as Broadcaster', 're-evaluates Thompson's poetry through his experience of the medium he served, and his changing sense of the radiophonic possibilities of verse.' Through a close reading of selected verse by Thompson, Kirkpatrick played an important role in shaping Australia's 'middlebrow poetic culture ... after the Second World War' and concludes that, 'on the airwaves, Thompson was the authoritative patrician voice of a style of broadly accessible "public" verse, which was canonised in the Penguin anthology, and against which "the Generation of '68—the year of Thompson's death—so violently reacted.'

The concern with the past returns in Susan Ryan-Fazileau's '*Samson and Delilah: Herstory, Trauma and Survival*'. In a close reading of the Warwick Thornton's film, she proposes that it 'invites the viewer to reflect on the legacy of trauma in an Indigenous community in today's Australia and that [Thornton's] narrative pays tribute to the strength and healing powers of women'. The essay draws closely on trauma theory to explore the role *Samson and Delilah* plays in the continued rehearsal of the experience of trauma of Australian Indigenous peoples but in turn also of its ability to shine a lens into the national psyche.

Finally, we would like to offer our apologies for the delayed publication of the *JASAL 11: 2* issue and hope that the quality of the work here included will have it made worth waiting for.

Frances Devlin-Glass and Tony Simoes da Silva

* Since the publication of this introduction on February 21 2012, the editors have been made aware by a very reliable source that the claim made by Mudrooroo in his essay that his sister Betty has passed away is incorrect. March 16 2012